

Short Communication

The Relationship between Religiosity and Happiness among Students in an Iranian University

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between religion and happiness as espoused by 358 undergraduate Iranian Muslim students (165 men, 193 women). Participants completed Farsi versions of the Oxford Happiness Inventory, the Depression-Happiness Scale and the Religious Orientation Scale. Analysis confirmed a significant positive association between religion and happiness among the sample of Iranian Muslim students. Scores on the Religious Orientation Scale were significantly related to those on the Oxford Happiness Inventory ($r = 0.34, P < .001$), as were scores with the Religious Orientation Scale and the Depression-Happiness Scale ($r = 0.29, P < .001$).

Keywords: Happiness, religion, university students

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, there has been growing interest in the positive aspects of psychological functioning, which consists of psychological well-being, subjective well-being, satisfaction with life and

happiness. (Diener, 1999; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Seligman, 2002; Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Carr, 2004; & Snyder & Lopze, 2006). Psychological well-being is a complex construct involving both positive and negative effects (Diener *et al.*, 1999).

The relationship between religion and psychological well-being and physical health has been investigated within and outside of the psychology of religion. Empirical research of religion and mental health includes epidemiologic studies

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involving community samples, clinical studies and social and behavioral studies on psychological distress and subjective well-being (Levin, 2010).

The positive impact of religion on mental and physical health has been reported in numerous studies. Some studies have found no association between religion and physical or mental health) Crawford, Handal, & Weiner, 1989; Williams *et al.*, 1991; Lewis *et al.*, 1996; Thoresen, 1999; Koenig *et al.*, 2001; Francies & Kaldor, 2002; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; O'Connor *et al.*, 2003; Francies, Robbins, Lewis *et al.*, 2004; Pargament *et al.*, 2005; Hicks & King, 2008. Many of these studies, however, explored the impact of religious attitudes on psychiatric and mental health outcomes in population, community and hospital samples, such as depression, anxiety and levels of psychological distress.

Religion is as old as man and dates back to the appearance of the first man on the planet (Zagzebski, 2007). Religious practices and beliefs have a main and dominant role in the life of people everywhere in the world (Koenig & Larson, 2001). Furthermore, religion is considered a multidimensional concept (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). The two important approaches that are applied in the definition of religion are substantive and functionalist (Clack & Clack, 2008).

Religious orientations are the key component of religious life and include the extent to which one adheres to a belief system and the importance of religion in the individual's life (Evans *et al.*, 2010).

Religion is composed of beliefs and behaviours with a moral part (Young & Koopsen, 2005). According to Allport, commitment to religious beliefs can help organise and give constructive meaning to human life (Ryckman, 2008).

Happiness, like religion, has been taken into account as a multidimensional concept that comprises emotional and cognitive components (Hills & Argyle, 2001; Diener *et al.*, 2003). Argyle (2001) proposed that the concept of happiness comprises (1) average satisfaction over a certain period; (2) frequency and amount of positive effect or joy; and (3) the relative absence of negative effect such as depression and anxiety. Numerous variables have been studied in relation to happiness including gender (eg. Mahon *et al.*, 2005), locus of control (Boschen, 1996; Kelley & Stack, 2000), socio-economic status (Vera-Villaruel *et al.*, 2012) and self-esteem (Lyubomirsky *et al.*, 2006).

There has been growing interest in examining the relationship between religion and happiness in the psychology of religion (see Lewis & Cruise, 2006). Many studies have examined the relationship between religion and happiness within the Christian population and a number of these investigations have employed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis & Stubbs, 1987), the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle *et al.*, 1989) and the Depression-Happiness Scale (McGreal & Joseph, 1993). Considering the relationship between religion and happiness, a significant positive association has been

reported by Robbins and Francis (1996), Francis and Lester (1997), Francis and Joseph (1999), Francis and Robbins (2000), Francis *et al.*, White (2003), Abdel-Khalek (2008) and Abdel-Khalek and Lester (2009). In contrast, some studies did not report any significant correlation (Lewis *et al.*, 2000, Francis *et al.*, 2003; Lewis, Maltby, & Day, 2005).

The positive effect of religion on happiness stems largely from the sense of meaning and purpose that religiosity provides to the individuals (Diener *et al.*, 2009). Religious orientation, however, provides an all-inclusive set of meanings and values for interpretation of human events (Colón-Bacó, 2010). Researchers have also examined the relationship between religion and well-being in Muslim samples (Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004; Baroun, 2006; Noor, 2008; Abdel-Khalek, 2008, 2009). They found that religiosity and well-being were significantly correlated in samples of Muslim subjects too.

Since there is a paucity of empirical studies into student happiness, and the association of religiosity with happiness is rarely studied with regards to Muslim students, the present study can contribute to understanding in this area.

RESEARCH AIMS

The present study attempted to extend or improve upon previous investigation in three ways: First, we wanted to determine the extent to which religion ordination was related to happiness among Muslim students. In addition, we wanted to determine whether

gender differences on each of these measures were present. Finally, we wanted to estimate the internal consistency reliability of the scales in a student sample.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

Participants

Undergraduate students of the Islamic Azad University, Azadshahr branch (193 women, 165 men) took part in this study. The stratified sampling method was used to select participants. The sample represented different fields of study and ethnic groups. Their ages ranged from 19 to 48 ($M = 26.2$, $SD = 10.2$); 125 were married while 233 were single. They participated voluntarily in this study. All respondents completed a questionnaire booklet containing three self-report measures. The instruments were completed during a class under the supervision of one of the research assistants.

Procedure

Analysis of the data proceeded as follows. We first assessed the internal consistency of the scales. Next, we assessed gender differences on any of the instruments. Finally, we investigated the relationship between the religion orientation and happiness.

Measures

Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989): We used the Farsi version of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Alipour, Nourbala, Ejei, & Motieyan, 2000). This instrument contains 29 multiple-choice items. Participants

choose one of four sentences that reflect level of happiness from the lowest (*I do not feel happy*) to the highest (*I feel extremely happy*). The Persian version of the Oxford Happiness Inventory had adequate internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.93 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.80. (Bayani, 2008).

Depression-Happiness Scale (McGreal & Joseph, 1993): This is a 25-item instrument designed to measure positive effects. It contains 12 items concerned with positive feelings and 13 items concerned with negative feelings. We used the Farsi version of the Depression-Happiness Scale (Bayani, 2006). Bayani (2006) validated the Depression-Happiness Scale on a sample of 109 men and women and found internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.93 and test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.73.

The Persian version of Religious Orientation Scale (Bahramiahsan, 2001): This is a 45-item Likert instrument dealt with orientation towards Islam. The Persian version of the Religious Orientation Scale had adequate internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.85 (Bahramiahsan, 2001).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows values of the coefficient alpha and the mean scores for men and women in the Oxford Happiness Inventory, the Depression-Happiness Scale and the Religious Orientation Scale.

As Table 1 shows, the internal consistent reliability estimates for all of the scales are acceptable and quite good. The coefficient

alphas were 0.88 for Religious Orientation Scale, 0.91 for the Oxford Happiness Inventory and 0.90 for the Depression-Happiness Scale. An independent sample *t*-test showed that males scored significantly higher than females in the Depression-Happiness Scale ($t=3.69$, $p<0.001$) and the Oxford Happiness Inventory ($t=5.35$, $p<0.001$). There is no significant difference between males and females in the Religious Orientation Scale.

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlations between scores on each of the measures. Scores on the Religious Orientation Scale were significantly related to those on the Oxford Happiness Inventory ($r = 0.34$, $P < .001$), as were scores with the Religious Orientation Scale and the Depression-Happiness Scale ($r = 0.29$, $P < .001$). A significant positive correlation has been found between the scores on the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the Depression-Happiness Scale ($r = 0.80$, $P < .001$).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In recent years, interest in understanding the effects of religion on psychological well-being has grown in the area of psychology of religion. Therefore, the main purpose of present study was to examine the relationship between happiness and religious orientation in a sample of undergraduate Muslim students.

Regarding the relationship between religion and happiness in Christian samples, previous studies yielded inconsistent findings (Robbins & Francis, 1996; Maltby & Day, 2005). In this study, two Persian

TABLE 1
Mean Standard Deviation and Internal Consistency of Scale by Scale

Scales	α	Men ($n=165$)		Women ($n=193$)		t
		M	SD	M	SD	
Religious Orientation Scale	.88	89.49	7.73	88.24	9.06	1.38
Oxford Happiness Inventory	.91	53.32	15.63	44.86	14.25	5.35*
Depression-Happiness Scale	.90	49.85	16.23	47.10	11.87	3.69*

Note. - * $P < .001$

TABLE 2
Pearson Correlation Matrix for Total Scale

Scales	Total ($n=358$)			Men ($n=165$)			Women ($n=193$)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
1. ROS									
2. OHI	.34*			.36*			.32*		
3. DHS	.29*	.80*		.33*	.81*		.27*	.79*	

Note. – ROS= Religious Orientation Scale; OHI= Oxford Happiness Inventory; DHS= Depression-Happiness. Scale; $P < .001$

versions of most commonly used happiness scales (the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the Depression-Happiness Scale) were employed. Analysis indicated a positive association between religion and happiness, which was in line with the previous results reported by Robbins and Francis (1996), Francis and Lester (1997), Francis and Joseph (1999), Francis and Robbins (2000), Francis, Robbins and White (2003), Abdel-Khalek (2008) and Abdel-Khalek & Lester (2009), although it is noteworthy that the identified relationship in the present study was higher than values obtained in many of the previous studies.

Contrary to Argyle and Hills (2000), Lewis, Maltby and Burkinshaw (2000), Francis, Ziebertz and Lewis (2003) and Lewis, Maltby and Day (2005), we found a significant positive association between religion and happiness in a sample of

undergraduate Muslim students. Research results indicated there were differences in happiness according to gender between male and female students. Male students tended to show greater happiness than female students. In most findings, however, women consistently report more negative emotions than men (Tesch-Romer *et al.*, 2008).

The present study provides further support for the validity and reliability of the Oxford Happiness Inventory, the Depression-Happiness Scale and the Religious Orientation Scale in a student sample. This finding is consistent with results reported by Bayani (2008), Bayani (2006) and Bahramiahsan (2001). Several research studies, including the current study, conclude that religion plays a major role in human life and happiness. We found that there is a relationship between self-rating of religiosity and happiness.

A few limitations need to be considered when interpreting the results of this study. The sample was selected from only one university. This sample may not be representative of all students in Iran. Research participants were a random sample of Iranian students. Thus, the findings may not generalise to students in other countries.

Although research on the relationship between religion and happiness has accumulated considerable literature, there exists a need for cross-cultural studies to determine the effect of religious ordination on happiness in different cultures.

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